
ENVIRONMENTAL Fact Sheet



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Management of Vehicle Wash Water

Winter weather in New Hampshire creates the necessity for the application of salt and other de-icing substances to keep roadways safe for driving. Road salt and road grime can accumulate on vehicles and if not routinely removed can cause the exposed body and mechanical parts to deteriorate and fail. Routine washing serves as preventative maintenance that will minimize costly repairs throughout the life of a vehicle. Routine vehicle washing coupled with other routine vehicle maintenance can also improve vehicle safety because it will prevent the critical components of a vehicle from failing.

Vehicle washing generally includes steam cleaning, undercarriage washing, and cleaning of ancillary equipment. These activities can create large amounts of wastewater that may contain organic or inorganic chemicals that could contaminate groundwater. The discharge of such wastewater to groundwater falls under the Department of Environmental Services Groundwater Discharge Permitting and Registration Program and the Underground Injection Control (UIC) Program. The disposal systems regulated include those that involve discharges to ground surface or subsurface via dry wells, leach fields, retention basins, infiltration structures, surface infiltration and similar types of drainage wells.

DES has developed the following best management practices for various circumstances to help ensure that the disposal of vehicle wash water does not violate UIC rules and lead to groundwater contamination:

1. Discharge of the wash water into a vegetated area is allowed under the following circumstances:
 - Washing is completed utilizing low pressure wash techniques. Low pressure wash techniques include the use of brushes and hoses with nozzle only. Low pressure washing techniques do not include the use of power boosters or steam cleaning devices.
 - Soaps, detergents or regulated contaminants are not utilized in the washing processes.
 - Only the exterior and frame of vehicles may be washed. The engine or undercarriage may not be washed.
 - The facility responsible for washing vehicles must register the discharge of the wash water with DES in accordance with Env-Wq 402.33 (see information at the following link www.des.nh.gov/organization/divisions/water/dwgb/dwspp/gw_discharge/index.htm).
 - Fewer than 30 vehicles per week may be washed. If 30 or more vehicles per week are washed, then a groundwater discharge permit must be obtained in accordance with Env-Wq 402.

- Run-off from washing must not migrate to wetlands, surface water bodies or enter storm water drainage systems.
2. Discharge of the wash water into a holding tank with an oil-water separator is allowed under the following circumstances:
 - Washing may be completed using either high or low pressure.
 - Wash water may contain soap products
 - The holding tank must be registered with DES in accordance with Env-Wq 402.35.
 - Removal and disposal of materials from the oil-water separator and holding tank must be in conformance with all federal, state and local regulations and permit requirements.
 - Run-off from washing must not migrate to surface water bodies or enter separate storm water drainage systems.
 3. Discharge of the wash water over a pervious surface (gravel, sand and broken pavement areas) is allowed under the following circumstances:
 - Washing is completed utilizing low pressure wash techniques. Low pressure wash techniques include the use of brushes and hoses with nozzle only. Low pressure washing techniques do not include the use of power boosters or steam cleaning devices.
 - Soaps, detergents or regulated contaminants are not utilized in the washing processes unless specifically approved by DES.
 - Only the exterior and frame of vehicles may be washed. The engine or undercarriage may not be washed.
 - The discharge must be registered with DES in accordance with Env-Wq 402.33.
 - Fewer than 30 vehicles per week may be washed. If 30 or more vehicles per week are washed, then a groundwater discharge permit must be obtained in accordance with Env-Wq 402.
 - Run-off from washing must not migrate to surface water bodies or enter storm water drainage systems.
 - Sampling of the wash water effluent will be performed if requested by DES.
 - DES must be notified within 90 days when the discharge permanently ceases.
 4. Discharging of wash water to municipal sewage treatment plants is allowed under the following circumstances:
 - Obtain a permit from the authorized municipal official who is responsible for the operation and physical condition of the publicly owned treatment works.
 - Comply with all testing and discharge requirements associated with the local permit.

Vehicles may also be washed at commercial car and truck washes. These facilities either discharge to the local publicly operated treatment works or are required to be permitted by DES.

For More Information

For information about groundwater discharges, holding tank registration, contact the DES Underground Injection Control Coordinator at (603) 271-2858 or mitchell.locker@des.nh.gov.